DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 972 CG 023 927

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TITLE Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs: Effects on Early Identification.
PUB DATE Aug 91
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (99th, San Francisco, CA, August 16-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; *Children; *Elementary School Students; Grade 3; Identification; Prevention; Primary Education; *Program Effectiveness; *Sexual Abuse
IDENTIFIERS *Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting

ABSTRACT

The number of child sexual abuse prevention programs incorporated into school curricula has increased steadily in the past decade. This longitudinal study evaluated the effects of a school-based, child sexual abuse prevention program on child abuse reports in nine school districts over a five-year period. Districts had been randomly assigned to present their third grade sexual abuse prevention curriculum annually in either fall or spring. More specifically, child sexual abuse report rates from schools in the period corresponding to their program were compared to those from comparable schools without the program in that period, as well as to report rates for other types of problems and to report rates from other sources. The results provided empirical evidence that the school-based child sexual abuse prevention program increased relevant reporting behavior. These child abuse reports appeared to be as, or even more, likely to be substantiated than reports from other sources. Although there are a number of cautions to be considered, the results would appear to have implications for abuse prevention planning and implementation. For early identification to lead to early intervention, the child service agencies need to be able to respond to these rapid increases in reporting. If children and those in their support system are going to be taught to report abuse if it is suspected, then the system needs to be able to respond to those reports. (LLL)

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Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs: Effects on Early Identification[1]

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The number of child sexual abuse prevention programs incorporated into school curricula has increased steadily in the past decade. Typically these programs have primary prevention goals(e.g., to provide children with the knowledge and/or skills to recognize and avoid potentially abusive situations) and secondary prevention goals (e.g., to help children to know what to do if abuse is occurring so that early identification and intervention can occur). The goal of early identification is seen as particularly important as it is widely believed that sexual victimization of children often: (a) begins when the child is young; (b) is perpetrated by someone the child knows well; (c) continues for several years; (d) goes unreported during those years because either the child does not tell anyone and/or he/she is not believed; and (e) has debilitating effects which are cumulative and become more resistant to treatment the longer the abuse continues (e.g., Becker & Skinner, 1985). Consequently abuse prevention programs typically include components focusing on getting victims to tell someone in their support system and on teaching their support system to listen and to respond appropriately to them. It is hoped that by reaching victims at a young age, they would be more likely to identify themselves, making intervention possible sooner than it might have been otherwise.

Unfortunately there are relatively few published studies which have evaluated whether these programs accomplish such goals. Of those, most often a test of the children's relevant knowledge pre- and post-program is used as the basic outcome measure. The implicit assumption is that the better the children's scores on such tests, the more likely they are to engage in behaviors which will lead to primary or secondary prevention. For example, if children actually do tell someone in their support system that they are victims of abuse, and if the support system responds appropriately, one would expect abuse reports to

[1] Paper presented at a meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August, 1991. Dr. Ullman is a Professor of Psychology, Bowling Green State University, Dr. Donnelly is the Clinical Director of the Children's Resource Center, Ms. Simington is the Director of the Children's Services Division of the Wood County Department of Human Services, and Ms. Knox is the Director of Wood County Branch of The Family & Child Abuse Prevention Center - all in Bowling Green, OH.

increase systematically when these programs are delivered. However, there have been no previous efforts to assess directly whether these programs actually lead to changes in reporting behavior by children and/or school personnel.

The present study was a longitudinal evaluation of the effects of a school-based, child sexual abuse prevention program on child abuse reports in nine school districts over a five year period. Districts had been randomly assigned to present their third grade sexual abuse prevention curriculum annually in either Fall or Spring. More specifically, child sexual abuse report rates from schools in the period corresponding to their program were compared to those from comparable schools without the program in that period, as well as to report rates for other types of problems (e.g., neglect, unruly) and to report rates from other sources (e.g., neighbor, police).

Method

Subjects: All third grade children from nine school districts in a semi-rural county in a Midwestern state had received a sexual abuse prevention program as part of their school curriculum between Fall 1985 and Spring, 1990. There was an average of 770 children per year in the program in 32 classes. The nine school districts were comparable in terms of SES factors, general curriculum, and media sources.

Program: The program had been developed by a multi-agency team (i.e., personnel from schools, children's protective services agency, mental health system, prosecutor's office, etc.). Briefly, the program included a school personnel training component, a parent education component, a two day classroom component, and pre- and post-program abuse knowledge tests. The basic details of the program are described in Blass, Blechschmidt, Donnelly, Knox, Montgomery, Simington & Ullman, 1983.

Procedure: Each year half the districts (either four or five) had been randomly scheduled to present the program either in the Fall or the Spring. From the records of the county agency officially responsible for receiving all reports of suspected child maltreatment, it was possible to determine the number and types of reports (e.g., abuse, neglect, unruly), source of reports (e.g., school, neighbor, police) and disposition (whether report was substantiated) in each school district. If, in fact, the program was making it more likely that children would identify themselves as victims of sexual (or other forms of) abuse during or following the program, and if the school was reporting these disclosures appropriately, then one would

abuse report rates from school sources to increase during that period.

To make it possible to compare school districts of different sizes, the basic unit of data was the number of reports of each type of problem per 1,000 children in the school district per month from each source. To get more stable values, these rates were then averaged across the months in each half school year (Fall: September through December; Spring: January through April) between Fall, 1985 and Spring, 1990. Thus there were 10 data intervals for each type of report for each of the nine districts. These procedures were used to calculate report rates from both school and non-school sources.

Results

Analyses of Variance were used to compare the mean report rates from school sources for districts with Fall programs to those with Spring programs over the 10 time intervals from Fall, 1985 to Spring, 1990. Even with the relatively low statistical power from having only nine school districts, the results were clear and all statistically significant, $p < .01$. As might be expected, there was a main effect for time, with report rates increasing over the years. The critical finding was the interaction of when the program was offered (Fall or Spring) with time intervals. There were systematic, sharp increases in reports from schools of suspected child sexual abuse (and other forms of abuse) in the period corresponding to their program, relative to the schools without the program in that period. Consistently school districts with Fall programs would have higher abuse reporting rates in the Fall than districts with Spring programs. However, in the Spring, the reporting rates for districts with Spring programs would "catch up" to or exceed the ones with Fall programs, while the rates from Fall program districts would stabilize or decline. Note that whether any particular district had a Fall or Spring program in any given year was determined randomly. Thus there were clear indications that the program was associated with increased reporting. At the same time, other types of reports (e.g., neglect, unruly) as well as reports from other sources (e.g., neighbor, police) showed increases over time, but did not show systematic changes with the program period. Thus the effects appeared relatively specific to sexual and other forms of abuse, which were the focus of the program.

Also of interest was whether the children and school personnel were increasing spurious reports. Although substantiation of reports is an extremely complex issue (and beyond the scope of this paper), Chi-square analyses indicated that the proportion of substantiated abuse reports from the school program were equivalent to or higher than the proportion of substantiated reports from other sources.

Discussion

The results provided empirical evidence that the school-based child sexual abuse prevention program increased relevant reporting behavior. These child abuse reports appeared to be as, or even more likely to be substantiated than reports from other sources. Although there are a number of cautions to be considered, the results would appear to have implications for abuse prevention planning and implementation. For early identification to lead to early, and hopefully more successful, intervention, the child serving agencies (e.g., protective services, mental health, juvenile court) need to be able to respond to these rapid increases in reporting. If we are going to teach children and those in their support system to report abuse if it is suspected, than the system needs to be able to respond to those reports. Such findings highlight the importance of the relevant community agencies working together on such prevention programs.

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